

FILM REVIEWS

Monkeys in the Attic

A movie critic hates to be caught with the wrong expression on his face when the lights go up. Have I taken this movie too seriously, or not seriously enough? That I didn't laugh — *at all* — is that because I was being too earnest, writing notes in the dark, trying to *grasp* the film? The croaks and chuckles of amusement around me — were they the responses of appropriately attuned sensibilities, relaxing to the rhythms of this freaked-out fantasia, rocking to and fro with its abrupt shifts and discontinuities, its bizarre juxtapositions of tone? In finding the film funny, pretty continuously funny, were they reacting spasmodically to a series of spasms, or were they responding to a coherent comic vision of experience that spoke to their condition?

Monkeys in the Attic: one night in a house inhabited by four people. Two of them, Wanda and Eric, are spaced out; one of them, Elaine, is freaking out; the fourth, Frederick, is angry, bewildered, alternately bullying Elaine, appealing to her, and trying to control her. Nothing in the movie suggests that the characters have any existence outside it. They have no history, no palpable connections with a social milieu. No account is offered of what they do, who they are, why they live together, or how they acquired such expensive furniture. They are creatures of the imaginations of Morley Markson and John Palmer, conjured up to perform in a fantasia.

Elaine's is the central consciousness. Wanda and Eric clown, grimace, cavort, and chase each other in antic sexuality (Eric persistently puncturing their games, bringing Wanda down from her whimsies, a recurring symbolic *coitus interruptus*). Elaine wanders through the house looking distraught and hysterical, gulping Courvoisier and pills, and the film repeatedly renders her inner experience (never anyone else's) as a maddening, terrorizing nightmare, in which Wanda and Eric oppress her with their surrealistic freakishness, their acting-out of psychic anarchy, and Frederick oppresses her with his domineering, Super-Egotistical hostility. Frederick claims to love her and to be concerned about her, but the pattern of his behaviour contradicts this claim — a classic schizogenic manoeuvre.

Let's drive Elaine crazy? Or does Elaine only experience their behaviour as a conspiracy to torment her because

she is already crazy? Are Wanda and Eric quite happily doing their own zany thing, radically liberated from conventional consciousness? Or are they, too (especially Wanda) on the verge of hysterical collapse, distracted from distraction by distraction? Elaine furiously accuses Wanda of "acting all the time . . . being a crazy fool", to which Wanda responds with a burst of anguish. Certainly, to this viewer, anguish and desperation seemed to be the propulsion behind most of the frantic goings-on.

And I remember Morley's earlier film, **Zero the Fool**, in which three tense and anxious people were propelled into spasms of hysteria by a fourth person — Morley himself, behind the camera. In that movie the cinematic mode was B & W *cinéma vérité*, catch-as-you-can-while-it's-going-on. There were scenes of all-too-real pain, as the participants (I won't say 'actors') begged Morley, the demonic enchanter, to release them, to turn off the X-ray machine. The suffering was wrenched out in authentic displays of anguish on real faces.

In **Monkeys** there is a different kind of contrivance. Instead of extorting the overflow of craziness from real people (in a travesty of encounter therapy) and then recording it, he gets his actors to *imitate* craziness, in a crazy environment, crazily photographed. The camera is constantly peering up stairwells, leering into mirrors, coming at people around corners, from above, below, between. Angles shift and reel, light glares, fades, shimmers. The dissolve is the essential linking device in the film's repertoire; shots blend and blur; disparate events and moments in time are

Jess Walton



made to interpenetrate and overlap, breaking down the solidity of fact into the fluidity of impressions. The subjectivity of vision established in this way seems to coincide more or less with Elaine's psychic turmoil. But, as a mode of presentation, it encompasses scenes and actions which have no connection with her. Only the scenes involving Frederick are exempt from this stylization. With what seems like a deliberate consistency, Frederick is shown with a distance and objectivity that match the unsympathetic harshness of his emotional presence.

And beyond this cinematic hot-housing, so different from **Zero the Fool**, there is the attempt, equally different, to render hysteria from the inside. By certain conventional cinematic signs we are asked to receive considerable portions of this bizarre concoction as representing Elaine's half-doped blend of memory, dream and fantasy. Water cascades over Niagara Falls, the figures of the other three characters loom and writhe and make menacing speeches at her, and cries and whispers echo in the gloom.

Occasionally the characters speak to each other in what seem like the accents of 'normal' consciousness. From such moments a perspective is fleetingly established from which to get a fix on the more eccentric behaviour. But the acting in such moments is crudely unconvincing, and the hint of genuine and coherent emotional lives thoroughly implausible. For the 'world' conjured up by Markson and Palmer (remember that long night-in-a-madhouse play of Palmer's, **The End**?) has no connection with any of the modes in which life is actually experienced. Nobody's life ever looked like the circus created in **Monkeys**, or (more important, since I'm not insisting on any narrow criterion of 'realism') ever *felt like it* from the inside either. In other words, the movie doesn't hold a mirror up to human experience, however distorting, from whatever angle, but reflects only itself. Its mirrors — the film is full of mirrors — only bounce back and forth reflections of a self-contained, and hence arbitrary, hence irrelevant, craziness.

Most of the people at the screening I attended found it funny, i.e. they made sounds expressive of amusement. But I ask again, as I did at the beginning, were they laughing at what came to them as a comic vision of life, or only at a series

of random incongruities?

It remains to mention the other main ingredient of the film's recipe, introduced about half way through the cooking time, and thereafter sprinkled very liberally. More or less accidentally Elaine orders a pizza, and when the delivery boy arrives with it he finds himself drawn into the bewildering maelstrom that has been going on half the night. All four characters alternately seduce and spurn him, undress him, push him into the bath, throw him downstairs, tip him (and all his pizzas) into the pool, squirm over him, abuse, wheedle, and generally disorient him. Through it all he hangs on in the hope of at least one simple fuck, without any fixin's.

The audience seemed to identify eagerly with this relatively pedestrian consciousness, and to enjoy the TV sit-com humour of a series of dumb-delivery-boy-meets-(horny)-Gracie-Allen jokes. Perhaps this should be taken as an important clue. The humour extracted from the pizza boy is simple stuff, and essentially derived from TV comedy. Markson hasn't introduced a 'normal' consciousness as a perspective from which to view the freaks, but a goofy dope, a Gomer Pyle — in other words, another freak. So the artificial world remains unbroken.

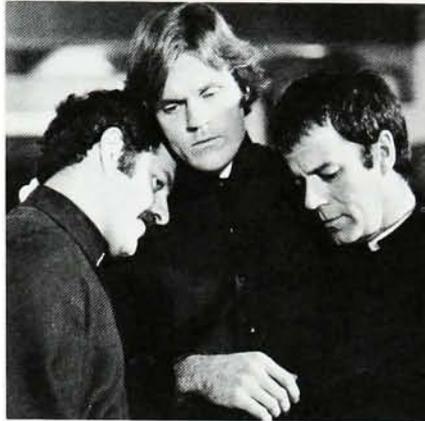
Monkeys is the kind of film which asks to be compared with other films. To stack it up against the big ones: it falls between the intense dramatization of madness by Bergman, who would rely far more on his actors' ability to project complex feeling, and the surreal fantasia of Buñuel, whose anarchic dreams in *Discreet Charm* are so deadpan that we don't recognize them as dreams until someone wakes up from them. These are mountaintop heights to fall between, and where Morley lands is somewhere in the vicinity of Fellini. **Monkeys** is an extravagantly good-looking film, full of energy and inventiveness exerted by a talent which perhaps overspends itself on a mirage.

—Robert Fothergill

Only God Knows

In the beginning was the Idea.

Something started the ball rolling. Perhaps it was the old joke: did you hear the one about the priest, the minister and the rabbi...? Perhaps it was simply the title, an innocent expression, "only God knows".



Paul Hecht, John Beck and Gordon Pinsent

All of which sounds like an ad man's dream; great stuff for a publicity campaign (and they've certainly made the best of it). But for a film? It must have been something a little more promising. Perhaps it was the plotline: three men of the cloth steal two hundred thousand dollars from the Mafia, armed only with the best of intentions and the clearest of consciences. Call it comedy. Well, whatever the inspiration, **Only God Knows** probably was once a great idea. Unfortunately, there's a fairly long route between a great idea and a great or even good film. Someone (was it producer Larry Dane, writer Haskell Gray or director Peter Pearson?) evidently misjudged the distance.

It's a pleasant enough film, but between the tired old Hollywood sight gags, the many and god-awful double entendres and the superficiality of a world where (for example) a man's ability to pronounce Hanukkah properly is sufficient proof that he's not anti-Semitic, there's very little which rises above the level of the Sacred and the Inane. An irreverent story needs an irreverent hand in the telling. Instead, **Only God Knows** plays everything for the easy but instantly forgettable laugh (very much like a television sitcom) and as a result, one and all involved are quickly reduced to mildly amusing and rather witless caricatures. It's no credit to the Holy Trinity that they finally *outfool* the Mafia.

As they're presented, Father Hagan (Gordon Pinsent), Reverend Norman (Jack Beck) and Rabbi Sherman (Paul Hecht) are effectively crooks (and lucky crooks, at that) who happen, quite incidentally, to be members of the

clergy. They launch their caper on the shallowest of rationalizations, and although their act is of desperation, they themselves are hardly desperate men. There's the gentle Father, the head of an impressive Church and yet the mastermind and driving force behind a scheme borne in confessional. And there's the hip young Reverend, blue jeans cowboy boots and all, who quotes the Bible with tongue-in-check to those in his flock who would rather be seduced than saved. Not to forget the good Rabbi, the most compassionate of the three, and a man facing divorce as the reward for his dedication.

Together, they run an interfaith drug rehabilitation centre, *Junkhouse*, and face dispossession along with its young inhabitants because they lack the two hundred thousand dollars needed to pay the bills. While Father Hagan mulls over the problem, the local Don (Louis Tanno), an aging gentleman with exquisite taste in wine and art, is busy coping with a bothersome conscience. In the best Mafia tradition, the two get together and an offer is made: it seems only fitting that the Don's four and a half million dollar fortune, made in the drug trade, should go to *Junkhouse* in return, of course, for absolution and entrance to Heaven. Hardly an offer to refuse (is there any other kind these days?) but unfortunately it's not made official before the old man inconveniently dies. So the God Squad must steal what's "rightfully theirs". Honourable men that they are, they'll take only the two hundred grand they need.

Although Pinsent, Beck and Hecht seem like quite an acceptable team of comedians, they're not allowed the opportunity to be convincing as clergymen. Their characters are drawn superficially, much in the spirit of "the clothes make the man"; the cassock, collar and cap serve to identify but do nothing to bring the breath of life.

So okay, it's a comedy verging (intentionally or not) towards farce, and perhaps Dane/Gray/Pearson intended the priest the minister and the rabbi simply to be an extension of that old joke. But the laughs are not any smoother or more effective for the lack of real-live characters. In fact, the film moves along at an uncomfortably ceremonial pace as the gags, including an ecumenical "drag" sequence and an improbable car chase through open fields (is this becoming the Pearson